

Matthew 5: 21 – 37

*It was said 'Whoever divorces his wife let him give her a certificate of divorce'
But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of
unchastity, causes her to commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced
women commits adultery.*

So while the world is celebrating St Valentine, we get Jesus' hard teaching about divorce and remarriage! Such is life in the C of E. And as a church which some say began with the divorce of the monarch, perhaps our obsession is not surprising.

Though Henry VIII never actually got divorced. In order to get divorced he would have had to get into a time machine and drive 130 years into the future to visit the Puritans, who invented divorce in the UK as a replacement for decrees of nullity (the old pre-reformation system) which is what Henry used. So there is your new fact for the day.

But we must turn back to the hard teaching, which, if we are to take scripture seriously, and I would want to do that, deserves some detailed attention.

First there the immediate background to the text. We know that there was controversy between two rival rabbinic schools about the interpretation of the law of Moses set out in Deuteronomy 24. On one side Rabbi Shammai took a rigorist line, saying that divorce was only possible on grounds of adultery. On the other side Rabbi Hillel took a very lax view, allowed a man to divorce his wife if she was an

incompetent cook, or if he tired of her looks and fell for someone more beautiful. Which side would Jesus be on? Well Shammai, it would seem. Divorce only in case of adultery.

Then, secondly, there was the place of women as background to the text. It was almost impossible for a Jewish woman to initiate divorce. The law, economy and social attitudes were biased against her. Nearly all divorces were initiated by men. And by restricting the grounds for divorce Jesus was, so some extend protecting women. But there is still no denying the teaching is tough. Jesus assumes that there will be marriage after the divorce, not least for women to find a place in a society were a single women would be outcaste. He tells his disciples that such remarriage would be adulterous. Divorce only in the case of adultery, and no remarriage

Third, there is the context of the text in this gospel of Matthew. This hard saying comes within Jesus' great outpouring of wisdom often called the sermon on the mount. In the sermon a phrases recurs: *You have heard it said.....But I say to you....* These phrases mark out the new way Jesus was and is offering to those who want to follow. The Waywas and is a voluntary society: you had and have to choose to join and there were and were and arenosecond-generation members. Contrary to precedent it was and is mixed racially religiously, and economically, when he created this society Jesus gave its members a new way to live. He gave them a new way to deal with violence: by suffering. He gave them a new way to deal with money: by sharing. He gave then a new way to deal with the problems of leadership: by drawing uponthe gifts of every member. He gave them a new way to deal with a corrupt society:

by building a new order. He gave them a new pattern of relationship between men and women, parent and child, master and slave. He still says that the law is to be observed: murder, adultery, divorce, oaths, retaliation and hatred of enemies are forbidden because this was a new kind of community, in which, for instance, a woman which had been divorced and abandoned did not have to remarry because she was honoured and accepted without needing to remarry. If followers of Jesus do not have to remarry the church must be a community of friendship which is an alternative to the loneliness of the world. Marriage itself is to be rethought and reframed.

But fourth, there is the context of the much broader scriptural horizon. We are told the story that in the very beginning God created Adam, and recognized that it was not good for him to be alone. That is the root of the words read at every marriage service in the Church of England which states that *marriage is a gift of God in creation* and the church offers that gift because it is simply so good for us. We also hear the scriptural story that, again in the beginning, Adam and Eve disobeyed the one who had given them life. We know that human beings have a propensity to sinfulness, and those who marry are not immune. The church therefore declares that that marriage is a relationship within which failure can be faced, forgiveness found and love learnt. As such it is the bedrock of a rapidly changing society. But the church also declares that sometimes marriage cannot contain that failure and sin, that sometimes marriage vows are broken and marriage relationships die. But in scripture, alongside the story of sinfulness we also hear of the wideness of God's mercy. Over and over again we read of God welcoming back those who have gone very very wrong. We though we

know that the Church is called to be a community of friendship, it doesn't necessarily live up to its calling, and for many the greatest school for healing and grace is a new marriage. The House of Bishops has had a go at summing up this sweep and complexity by saying '*The scope of God's holiness is the scope of God's mercy, and the more we are ready to open ourselves to the demand, the more we will know of God's generosity, forgiving us where we have failed, and granting us success where we thought we were bound to fail*¹.

So fifthly, what about the context of 21st century Church of England? The church has married those who have a former spouse still living for many many many years. Remember Henry V111. Though he had ways of making sure at least some of his former partners weren't still living. The Church always did marry divorcees before 1925, and through the rest of the 20th century we have struggled to confront all the hypocrisy of pretending we didn't. We are now in a more honest place. And with a more rigorous approach. My colleagues and I, when approached to marry those who are divorced, are required to make serious enquiries about the causes of the breakdown of a previous marriage, about the timing of the beginning of the new relationship, about the care of children, about the healing of memories. I guess all of us clergy find ourselves listening to heartrending stories of hurt, and heartwarming stories of the search for forgiveness and hope. The pastoral encounters are so rich that I often think that an equivalent process for those who haven't been divorced might bear fruit in preventing marriages failing.

¹ GS 1449

Last week the Church of England Synod debated the specific issue of divorced clergy (and those who are married to divorcees) who are being considered as candidates for the episcopate². Until Wednesday we had no agreed process for allowing their names to go forward. After a careful and sensitive debate, we now do have such a process, which will be even more rigorous than the one we clergy use in the parishes, with enquiries to be made of friends and colleagues, as well as of the former spouse. To use a phrase familiar in this context, their preferment will not be enterprised unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God. And for this small development of our practice, I for one am glad.

Vivienne Faulk

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² GS Misc 960